Oswald 'trial' TV film ready to roll here

By BOB BROCK
Broadcast Editor

Filming is expected to begin here next Thursday or Friday on the multi-million-dollar-budgeted "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald."

The four-hour-long, made-for-TV effort is being produced by Charles Fries Productions of Los Angeles for airing on ABC TV during the 1977-78 season.

Veteran writer Robert E. Thompson has fashioned an original television script based on the supposition that Oswald — alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy and in turn gunned down himself by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby — was not killed but was brought to trial for the purported murder of the President on the streets of Dallas in 1963.

The tele-play bears the same title as an off-Broadway drama written by Amram Ducovny and Leon Friedman. Fries Productions bought the play and title rights.

John Pleshette, a relatively unknown actor — although he has appeared in daytime serials and episodic nighttime programs — has been cast as Oswald. Pleshette had approached Fries Productions' about work as producer and writer when it was suggested that he test for the part of Oswald. According to an ABC spokesperson, casting director Eddie Foy III had

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previously tested 150 actors for the part and narrowed the field down to five.

"When Pleshette walked in," related the spokesperson, "Foy said he knew he had his Oswald. Pleshette is a dead-ringer. He is exactly the same height and weight and the facial resemblance is amazing."

Unsigned as yet is the actress who will play Marina Oswald, Lee Harvey's Russian-born wife. Marina, who has remarried, still lives in Dallas.

VETERAN ACTORS Ben Gazzara and Lorne Greene have been cast as prosecuting and defense attorneys, respectively. These roles, of course, are fictional, since Oswald was murdered before standing trial for his deeds, which also included the alleged killing of Dallas police officer J.D. Tippit.

Gazzara, who has done series TV as well as a number of films and dramatic specials, will play attorney Anson (Kip) Roberts, described as "a street-wise, ambitious, young Turk."

Greene, perhaps best known for his long-running role of Pa Cartwright in the Bonanza series, will be seen as attorney Matthew Arnold Weldon — "establishment, aristocratic and with a heart of gold."

"The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" reportedly is budgeted at $2 million. In the words of the ABC spokesperson, "it is being thought of the same terms, quality-wise, as the network's prestigious and award-winning 'Eleanor and Franklin' mini-series."

Larry Schiller, noted photo-journalist, writer and producer, and Richard Freed are co-producers of the project.

David Greene, who won an Emmy Award for his direction of ABC's original mini-version of "Rich Man, Poor Man," and was director of the opening episodes of this past season's highest-rated mini-series of all time, "Roots," will direct "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald."

THE PRODUCTION FIRM, currently in Dallas casting and lining up locations, is reluctant to release specific shooting plans because of the crowds that often flock to filming sites. There will be approximately 100 speaking parts — majority of them being cast locally — and the film will be shot entirely in Dallas and environs. Production is expected to continue through July.

Dallas locations will also be used to

approximate such diverse sites as Russia, Mexico City and New Orleans.

It has been learned that filming will be done in the vicinity of Oswald's apartment in Oak Cliff; the Texas Theater on Jefferson Blvd., where Oswald was apprehended the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, and at the Texas School Book Depository. It was from a widow of this building from which Oswald allegedly fired the fatal shots at President Kennedy.

Filming of the "trial" scenes will be done at McKinney in the Collins County courthouse.

"The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald," which was first offered and "passed" by NBC and CBS, is now one of two properties about participants in the events of November 1962 being planned as TV films for the upcoming season. CBS has announced it will present a docu-drama, "Oswald and Ruby." No production information has been released concerning the latter project.

The spokesperson for ABC said that the network was aware of the CBS film and hoped that it did not turn into another "Entebbe Raid race." The reference was to two, made-for-TV films last fall dealing with the events at the airport in Uganda on July 4, 1976, when Israeli commandoes rescued victims of a sky-jacked Air France plane. NBC announced a filmed project on the Entebbe rescue, then ABC beat NBC to the air with a videotaped drama recounting the sky-jacking.

ABC's spokesperson asserted that "The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald" had been in the planning stages for more than two years.